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Cuba's 'Ladies in White' targeted with arbitrary arrest and intimidation

The Cuban authorities must end their intimidation of a group of women campaigning for the release of political prisoners, Amnesty International said after 19 of the group's members were re-arrested yesterday.

The latest detentions took place yesterday in and near the south-eastern city of Santiago de Cuba, where the women were due to march silently and pray for the end of political imprisonment.

Over the last month, the "Ladies in White" (Damas de Blanco) and their supporters have repeatedly faced arbitrary arrest and physical attacks as they staged protests in several towns in the region.

"The ongoing harassment of these courageous women has to stop. The Cuban authorities must allow them to march peacefully and to attend religious services as they wish," said Javier Zuñiga, Special Advisor at Amnesty International.

The latest arrests took place as "Ladies in White" gathered in several locations to make their way to a planned march at the Cathedral in Santiago de Cuba.

Eleven of the "Ladies in White" gathered yesterday morning at the home of a supporter in the town of Palma Soriano.

A crowd of some 100 people, including police, officials and government supporters, surrounded the house for several hours. When the women attempted to leave, police pushed them and pulled their hair before forcing them into buses.

They were driven a few kilometres away where they were transferred to police cars and dropped near their hometowns in the provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Holguín.

Police also surrounded the house of Tania Montoya Vázquez, another "Lady in White" from Palma Soriano for several hours yesterday, preventing her and two fellow protesters from leaving.

Five other "Ladies in White" who live in the city of Santiago were arrested before they could reach the Cathedral and were held in police stations for several hours.

It is believed that they have all been released. Beginning on 17 July, groups of the "Ladies in White" have gathered on Sundays to stage silent protests and attend mass in Santiago de Cuba and several nearby towns.

The "Ladies in White" and the "Ladies in Support" (Damas de Apoyo) are a nationwide network of activists in Cuba that have recently escalated their peaceful protests in eastern provinces.

In Havana and elsewhere, they have repeatedly suffered harassment from Cuban authorities for their peaceful protests.

In central Havana on 18 August 2011, 49 “Ladies in White” and their supporters were prevented from carrying out a protest in support of their members in Santiago de Cuba and other eastern provinces.

In 2003, Cuban authorities rounded up 75 of the group’s relatives for their involvement in peaceful criticism of the government.

The 75 dissidents were subjected to summary trials and sentenced to prison terms of up to 28 years. Amnesty International considered them all to be prisoners of conscience, and the last of them were finally released in May 2011.

The “Ladies in White” and “Ladies in Support” continue to peacefully protest for the release of others who they believe have been imprisoned due to their dissident activities.

“It is unacceptable for the government under Raúl Castro’s leadership to perpetuate a climate of fear and repression to silence ordinary Cubans when they dare to speak out,” said Javier Zuñiga.